FORUM 42: CHILDREN AS SUBJECTS

Abstract: This discussion is dedicated to the question of whether it is possible to overcome the power asymmetry between researchers and their subjects in the study of childhood, or at the very least to reduce the gulf between researchers and the objects of their studies. The 'new sociology of childhood' places the individual personality of the child and his / her personal interests at the centre of scholarly investigation, though its central presuppositions remain in some respects controversial. The focus on children's subjectivity in academic work is related to the public acknowledgement of children's agency as political and legal subjects. In this framework, the participants discuss the ethical and methodological problems related to work with children as subjects in childhood studies.

Keywords: children's subjectivity, the 'new sociology of childhood', childhood studies.

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Forum 42: Children as Subjects

This discussion is dedicated to the question of whether it is possible to overcome the power asymmetry between researchers and their subjects in the study of childhood, or at the very least to reduce the gulf between researchers and the objects of their studies. The 'new sociology of childhood' places the individual personality of the child and his / her personal interests at the centre of scholarly investigation, though its central presuppositions remain in some respects controversial. The focus on children's subjectivity in academic work is related to the public acknowledgement of children's agency as political and legal subjects. In this framework, the participants discuss the ethical and methodological problems related to work with children as subjects in childhood studies.

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EDITORS' QUESTIONS

In the early 1990s, advocates of the 'new sociology of childhood' were able to demonstrate that the influence of developmental psychology on sociological theories of child development had led to the conceptualisation of children as inchoate organisms, capable of attaining independence only subject to socialisation within the family or in education institutions [Qvortrup et al. 1994]. The 'new sociology of childhood', by contrast, placed the individual personality of the child and his / her personal interests at the centre of scholarly investigation. Despite the significant impact of these discussions, their central presuppositions remain to a significant degree controversial [Lancy 2012], and some scholars question how far one can modify or mitigate the empowerment of the person directing research relative to the child (i.e. adjust the adult perspective) [Dudenkova 2014], and, indeed, whether modification or mitigation may be possible in the first place.

The focus on child-centred perceptions in academic work goes in parallel with the drive to overcome discrimination against children and to acknowledge their social agency. On the one hand, awareness of social processes in the present day enhances attention to children's culture, yet on the other, this can provoke accusations of undue sensitivity to the prevailing ideological moods of the present. And criticism of this order is often well-founded, since adherence to the tenets of the new sociology

often fails to go beyond empty gesticulation. Unlike gender studies or women's studies, the study of childhood still often presents children as the passive objects of acculturation — as observers or those who enact the ideas of others, or, on the other hand, consumers.

The drive to explain the conceptual foundations of children's subjectivity is fraught with methodological problems. The adoption of methods that allow direct contact with children is likely to run into severe difficulties — legal, institutional, psychological, ethical, among others. If the material used is, say, memoirs by adults of their experiences in childhood, or on the other hand, texts written by children themselves (diaries, letters, and so on), then sources of this kind often inspire scepticism and arguments about their likely lack of objectivity, and / or doubts about the capacity of children to create texts that are free from the ideological and discursive models offered by the world of adults.

In the context of these discussions, participants were asked to consider the following questions:

1 *Is it possible to overcome the power asymmetry between researchers and their subjects in the study of childhood, to halt the process by which researchers endow children with their own subjectivity, or at the very least to reduce the gulf between researchers and the objects of their studies?*

2 *In which areas (disciplinary, thematic, etc.) of the study of childhood is it legitimate or requisite to accommodate the 'voice' or 'perspective' of children themselves? In which does this endeavour strike you as dubious or problematic? What value does a child-centred approach hold for your own investigations?*

3 *Where, in your view, should one see the relation between the attention to children's subjectivity in academic work and the public acknowledgement of children's agency as political and legal subjects?*

4 *Which research materials and methods of investigation / analytical instruments facilitate understandings of children's culture that are unmediated by adult perceptions and representations?*

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Studying Those Who Study Children: Children's Subjectivity between Epistemology and Ethics

1. Children's subjectivity as an epistemological problem

My own research into the history of scientific approaches to the child in late imperial Russia and the early Soviet Union does not involve work on or with children as subjects, nor is it motivated by an ambition to account for their subjectivity, perspective, voice, agency or worldview. However, my topic does prompt the question of what kinds of relationship pertain between researchers and children as their research subjects and / or objects of study. The period that I focus on (1880–1930s) was indeed dominated by an emphasis on problems of development and socialisation that the 'new sociology of childhood' seeks to distance itself from. However, as the introduction to this 'Forum' rightly highlights, the 'new sociology of childhood' is not entirely clear about what precisely is entailed in its own revision of the relationship between the 'new' scholars of childhood and their subject(s).

The problem at hand is not simply one of methodology. Key to understanding what is at stake is to see that the relationship between science / scholarship on children / childhood and children as subjects / objects of study exists simultaneously on two distinct, yet strategically interlaced, planes — the ethical and the epistemological. It could be argued, in fact, that the principal mark of distinction of the 'new sociology of childhood' is its (broadly Foucauldian) insistence on keeping epistemology and ethics inseparable when studying children. Its main, historic, contribution to the debate is that, in childhood studies, ethics and epistemology are now pretty much hardwired and it is very difficult to imagine them being prised away from one another any time soon. Put slightly differently, one could say that the emphasis on

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children's subjecthood, which pervades contemporary historical, anthropological and sociological explorations of childhood, stems from an epistemology that is in a fundamental way shaped by an ethical 'dominant'. And this interlacing of ethics and epistemology is clearly in evidence also in the assumptions embedded in the four questions guiding this 'Forum'.

However, it is important not to forget that the problem of 'children's subjectivity in scholarly work on childhood', as posed by this 'Forum', remains an *epistemological* problem. Indeed, Q1 about the 'asymmetry of power' is clearly about the asymmetry of *knowledge*-power. Q2 on the child's 'perspective' ultimately concerns the status of this 'perspective' in a particular knowledge economy — for what is the child's 'perspective' here if not a metaphor for the child-subject's 'knowledge', which is made distinct from, but also placed in relation to, knowledge produced by the researcher. For sure, as Q3 implies, the epistemological status of the child-subject's 'knowledge' is inherently tied to the (politically and legally framed) moral status of 'the child' in a given society at a given time in history; and the latter can, in certain contexts, imply a significant elevation in status of the child-subject's 'knowledge'. However, there is still usually an assumption that such 'knowledge' (whether framed in experiential or cognitive terms) is not easy to fit within the regime of rationality in which scientific / scholarly knowledge is embedded by default and on which its dominant position in the wider knowledge economy ultimately depends. Yet when children's subjectivity is turned into something that science / scholarship needs to account for, this essentially becomes a problem of *translating* the child-subject's 'knowledge' into structures of knowledge recognised as those of science / scholarship. What I am referring to here are not the various means of 'objectification' through which science / scholarship so often ends up annulling the subjectivity of the child (that which the 'new sociology of childhood' is usually quite effective in denouncing). Rather, what I have in mind when invoking the operation of 'translation' is the epistemological problem of 'mediation' as expressed in Q4: if the child-subject's 'knowledge' can never be accessed in 'unmediated' form, then science / scholarship is faced with the task of, firstly, identifying 'materials' (sources, objects, etc.) that would serve as necessary 'mediators'; and secondly, devising special analytical and interpretative approaches that would perform the required 'translation' of the child-subject's 'knowledge' into the rational discourse of science / scholarship whereby the desired 'understanding' would be achieved.

What I propose to do in the remainder of my response to this 'Forum' is to reflect, for the sake of illustration, on one particular domain of the study of children and childhood where the interest of scholars from the past, namely those at the forefront of early

twentieth-century Russo-Soviet child science, and the interest of present-day historians and anthropologists of childhood (especially those studying 'children's culture') would appear to intersect. The case in question is the study of *that which children produce or create*, and this precisely as an example of 'materials' that research on children often views as a particularly important 'mediator' of children's subjectivities.

2. Children's 'outputs' as an object of study

What I have in mind here is almost anything that is produced by the children themselves, possibly but not necessarily 'spontaneously' — whether as part of play (free or guided), educational exercise, labour activity, medical therapy or scientific experiment. Typically, the materials in question include children's drawings, art and craft items, children's writings (essays, diaries, poems); but potentially also theatrical and musical performances, for instance. The provisional term that I shall use to refer to all of the above is children's *'output'*. The English word 'output' is conveniently vague, expandable and neutral (and I have deliberately placed it in inverted commas to reinforce the idea that, as a concept, it should remain tactically open). The Russian term that is commonly used in this context is *tvorchestvo* (i.e. children's 'creative output', also implying the more general notions of 'creation' and 'creativity'). *Tvorchestvo*, however, connotes a child that is an a priori 'creator', which might not, in fact, be the role that the child is, in a given situation, performing as producer of a particular 'output'. For sure, in many contexts, children's 'outputs' are, or at least can be, interpreted as manifestations of more or less spontaneous 'creativity'. But at other times emphasis might be on the 'output' as an outcome of *productive* rather than creative labour (an example of *detskiy trud* 'children's labour' rather than *detskoe tvorchestvo* 'children's creative work'). There are also numerous contexts in which a given 'output' is essentially a *response* to a stimulus or 'input' of some kind (pedagogical, experimental, diagnostic, therapeutic).

'Outputs' produced by a child can, of course, be analysed as saying something about the concrete child who has produced them (their personality, level of cognitive development, subjective worldview). However, rather more often scholarship makes them speak about 'the child' or 'childhood' in general; or about some particular subcategory of child (children with a mental disability, 'peasant children', 'street children', children belonging to a specific ethnic minority group, children of a particular age group); or indeed about a historically and culturally specific childhood (e.g. 'Soviet childhood'). Yet children's 'outputs' need not necessarily be functions of the study of 'the child' or 'childhood' per se; they can serve as empirical material for the study of (the development / evolution of)

'humanity' or 'the mind' (including the development of specific mental functions, such as, say, memory). Thus, precisely what is at stake when scholars study children's 'outputs' can be epistemologically hugely diverse, which means that it is essential to look quite closely at how specific bodies of science / scholarship, working in concrete scientific-intellectual, sociocultural and politico-historical contexts, treat children's 'outputs' as research material.

3. The study of children's 'outputs' in early twentieth-century Russo-Soviet child science

In early twentieth-century Russo-Soviet child science, collecting and analysing children's 'outputs' was certainly recognised as one among its many 'methods'. Both Russia's prerevolutionary child study movement and early-Soviet pedology were highly heterogenous fields, assembling a diversity of occupational priorities, disciplinary agendas and theoretical perspectives. Child science was commonly presented as a necessarily eclectic ensemble of topics and methods, each of which was needed to understand 'the child' as an exceptionally complex object of study. This was very much the understanding of child science promoted by the psychologist N. A. Rybnikov (1880–1961) — a key figure at the Central Pedological Institute in Moscow in the early Soviet era. In one of his early overviews of pedological research Rybnikov listed 'methods of studying products of child creativity', alongside also the study of 'children's drawings' and even their 'literary creativity' [Rybnikov 1922: 4, 24–5, 31]. He generally assumed that such 'outputs' should be systematically assembled into large corpora that would then be analysed in various ways, mostly by identifying patterns and regularities.

From the perspective of psychology, which dominated early twentieth-century child science, it was assumed that what I am calling here children's 'outputs' could serve as a potential point of access to the inner psychic life of the child, which otherwise lay 'hidden' from view, given that one could not rely on a child's 'introspection' (*samonablyudenie*) — the only *unmediated* way of accessing 'inner' psychic life according to psychological orthodoxy of the era. Although it was assumed that collections of children's 'outputs' could serve as repositories of data on any number of questions about the child's psyche, psychologists hoped that this material could provide insight especially into the child's emotional states and also their imagination — i.e. those *subjective* parts of the psyche that the otherwise dominant objective methods of experimental psychology, which focused mostly on measuring sensory and cognitive functions, found more difficult to access and analyse.

However, collecting, analysing and interpreting 'outputs' produced by children never achieved the prominence that objective methodo-

logies, such as mental tests, surveys or diary-based observations, enjoyed in Russo-Soviet child science. Most commonly, children's 'outputs' were treated as pieces of 'raw data' collected in the context of broader programmes of research that otherwise foregrounded observation and experimentation as their core methodologies. For example, a parent, teacher or psychologist observing a child in some educational or playtime context would commonly keep and archive what the child produced in some activity (whether spontaneously or under instruction). This would usually be treated as a piece of evidence complementing what was recorded in the diary of objective observation. An 'output' might also be prompted from the child in the context of some experiment (e.g. a drawing as part of a test); or it could sometimes be treated as analogous to a survey response (e.g. an essay requiring the child to reflect on their subjective 'ideals').

Yet the study of 'products of children's creativity' in and of themselves did not, in practice, develop into a particularly significant sub-area of pedological research at the time. The reason for this is not that children's subjectivity was being denied or ignored, but that scholars generally struggled to find ways of 'translating' the various 'outputs' that they were encountering and collecting in the process of empirical research into something that would be scientifically meaningful and relevant to them. Nonetheless, there was one particular type of 'output' — namely children's *drawings* — where such 'translation' was in fact performed with a certain degree of success, which is why this subdomain of research into children's 'outputs' saw greater expansion than the rest.

4. The study of children's drawings as the study of the child's distinctive mode of 'knowing'

One of the key reasons why the study of children's drawings assumed pride of place among the study of children's 'outputs' was that it was perceived as potentially providing an answer to the distinctive ways in which children 'knew' the world. Scholars saw children's drawings as a source that integrated two — in principle separate but in fact vitally intertwined — questions that seemed crucial to grasping the foundations of human knowledge: the distinctive nature of a) children's *perception* of the world and b) their *representation* of this world by symbolic means. Drawings appeared to bring the two together and the core assumption shaping research in this domain was that the development of drawing as a form of symbolic work went hand in hand with the development of perception itself.

Perception was a major, classical topic of psychology of this era, going back to the discipline's roots in empiricist philosophy and its interest in how the human mind knew the world; the topic remained important in lab-based experimental psychology, shaped as it was

by experimental physics and physiology. The core assumption of child science, though, was that children perceived the world differently to adults and children's drawings were expected to provide clues about this. One influential theory of how children's perception differed from those of adults, which had emerged in the early twentieth century, was the concept of the 'eidetic mind' — the idea that young children formed particularly vivid, 'photographic' mental impressions (something that also governed the way their memory worked in early stages of development). Eidetism was assumed to be a characteristic of the minds not just of children but also of 'primitive' peoples, and this connection was, crucially, made precisely by drawing parallels between how children and 'the primitives' visually represented the world in their respective artwork.

Vital to child science foregrounding drawing among children's 'outputs' was also that this activity appeared, on the face of it, to require minimal external support as children seemed to engage in it fairly spontaneously, just grabbing a pencil or paints and doodling or colouring from a very early age. Drawing thereby significantly contrasted other forms of creative or productive 'output', almost all of which was contingent on the child being taught quite complex skills, from craftwork to writing. In some respects, drawing as symbolic activity was understood as closest to speech, if not even more basic and 'primitive', more similar to gesture, allowing researchers to study what the neuropsychiatrist V. M. Bekhterev called 'symbolic reflexes'. However, Bekhterev's own paradigm of understanding all behaviour in terms of associational reflexes (*sochetatelnye refleksy*) also implied the need to incorporate into the analysis of children's symbolic work even the littlest external stimuli (such as introducing a pencil to a child or demonstrating to them how to hold it).

But where the study of children's drawings became really interesting to researchers was when drawing was used not simply as a source for studying structures of perception or 'symbolic reflexes' in their own right, but where the two could be shown to be part of the very same underlying structures of 'knowing'. Particularly controversial in this context became the issue of perspectival perception: namely, the question of the mind decoding an image that contained perspective. Already in the prerevolutionary era Bekhterev and his followers analysed collections of young children's drawings in order to show how these developed from strokes (*shtrikhi*) to squiggles (*karakuli*) to simple representations (e.g. an irregular circle with a dash or two, standing for almost anything) to increasingly more differentiated forms, with the introduction of perspective, crucially, featuring as something of an endpoint in the narrative of the development of drawing in children [Boldyreva 1913: 28–9]. The latter might appear as a matter of normatively enforcing

culturally specific 'adult' mental structures as a teleological goal of ontological development; but for Bekhterev as neuroscientist, the ability to code and decode perspective served simply as a marker that showed that the brain had developed to a particular level of neural complexity that was not in evidence in younger children.

However, the problem of perspective resurfaced in the late 1920s when a follower of Bekhterev, T. N. Baranova, a psychologist working in Tashkent, documented, controversially, that rural Uzbeks seemed unable to 'see' (i.e. properly decode) perspective [Baranova 1929]. Baranova attributed this to her research subjects' religiously-influenced insulation from visual culture as such, i.e. to the fact that they apparently never encountered figurative images in their environment and would have been culturally discouraged from engaging in visual representation more generally. This finding was later taken up by Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria as a potentially important confirmation of their cultural-historical theory of development, which argued that development depended on the acquisition of symbolic tools from the social environment [Lamdan, Yasnitsky 2016]. Crucial here was that it was not only the development of drawing as symbolic behaviour that required mediation from outside (which was something to be expected), but that the development of perception itself, i.e. of mental structures through which the world is 'known', depended on such cultural mediation as well.

It was at this point, however, that 'subjecthood' entered the scene, although not the subjecthood of children but of Soviet nationalities. In the context of the early 1930s' cultural revolution, the above studies were soon interpreted as chauvinistically claiming that some of the Soviet nationalities were culturally 'backward', even 'primitive'. The pedologists who made such arguments were swiftly denounced and the topic of 'perspective' effectively became taboo. However, this did not prevent scholars continuing to study the drawings of children from ethnic minority groups, so long as this did not imply allegations of civilizational 'backwardness'. In fact, in a 1935 study of the drawings of the children of Siberian Evenki, carried out by psychologist A. M. Schubert, the images analysed were still being associated with eidetic perception, as well as with the art of aboriginal peoples from across the world. However, the emphasis of this study was now on the superior aesthetic value of these drawings [Schubert 1935]. In fact, the drawings in question were promoted as testimonies of what appeared to be unusually advanced skills of representing objects that formed part of these children's distinctive environment (e.g. reindeer). Crucial here was that these drawings were attributed forms of *universal* value, both in terms of their aesthetic worth and as modes of 'knowing', given the 'accuracy' with which the Evenki children represented the reality that surrounded them.

5. Children's 'outputs' as evidence of educability: A different kind of ethical 'dominant'

The *value* that we invest in children's 'outputs' as objects of study is indeed crucial to understanding how particular 'outputs' become treated as the prized 'mediators' of children's subjectivities. Crucially, though, this value varies both culturally and historically. In late imperial and early Soviet Russia, children's testimonies were mainly valued in terms of how well the children producing them responded to external stimuli in the context of particular programmes of guided development (whether as part of progressive education, defectological therapy or systems of resocialisation). In other words, children's 'outputs' were essentially treated as a mark of 'achievement'. In fact, very often, the key purpose of collecting children's 'outputs', and even generating them in the first place, was for the sake of publicly displaying them in pedagogical museums or special exhibitions. And most commonly, the 'achievement' on display was not straightforwardly that of the children who produced the 'outputs', but of the institutions in which they were being educated or cared for. Yet at the same time, these 'outputs' were also intended as demonstrations of something pertaining to the children themselves — namely their *educability*. Indeed, the 'outputs' that went on display were almost always by those whose educability was actually in doubt — 'the difficult', 'the defective', 'the delinquent'. This also meant that, even as 'achievements', such 'outputs' were by default deemed inferior to standard forms of academic output of a more intellectual kind. The association of arts-and-crafts outputs with manual work reflected a strong class bias, which arguably persisted into the Soviet Union, despite the nominal reversal of class hierarchies after the revolution. For sure, early Soviet educational reformists sought to normalise learning through doing and making, as better suited to the new body politic of workers and peasants, in contrast to learning through the logocentric methods of reading and writing, associated with the values of the bourgeois intelligentsia. Nonetheless, the ideal outcome of Bolshevik 'labour education' was ultimately meant to become a hybrid of the two — a person 'of deep culture, but with work-callused hands' [Malinin, Fradkin 1993: 137].

Crucial to note in all of this, though, is that to foreground children's 'educability' as the key framework for interpreting children's 'outputs' need not be tantamount to the repressive subordination of children's subjectivity to a set of normative pedagogical structures and patterns of development ultimately determined and governed by 'adults'. It also does not mean that children thereby automatically become 'inchoate organisms, capable of attaining independence only subject to socialisation' (to quote from the introductory text to the 'Forum'). Rather, what it means is that, in the early twentieth century, the interest in specifically children's 'outputs' was governed

by a *different kind of ethical 'dominant'* — not the obligation to *emancipate* 'the child' as a 'subject' (as demanded by today's dominant ideology), but by an ethics (intimately tied to the project of modernity) that was rooted in the obligation to *elevate* the child to an ideal of humanity associated with 'civilisation' and 'culture'.

6. In lieu of a conclusion

My response to the 'Forum' questions has evidently not been an attempt to answer them as such. What I have sought to do is 'unpack' some of the dilemmas embedded in them from the perspective of my own research interests and findings. What I would like to finish with, though, is by suggesting the following: if we genuinely want to shed light on children's 'subjectivity' as a both ethical and epistemological problem, it is, in my view, vital to *study the study* of children, and to do so in historical perspective, ideally through an interdisciplinary combination of historical, sociological, anthropological and philosophical approaches. What I am essentially advocating here is an approach to knowledge-production in the field of childhood studies that would be broadly akin to what 'science and technology studies' have developed in relation to 'science' more generally. This would, I believe, introduce an in my view essential form of reflexivity into childhood studies that could help scholars cut through some of the epistemic knots in which the field appears to have gotten entangled (not least in its valiant efforts to conjoin epistemology with ethics).

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